

A Study Guide for
The Merry Wives of Windsor
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The Merry Wives of Windsor owes much of its audience appeal to the fact that it's such a knock-about comedy, full of farcical action, physical gags. It is finally a lot more than mere farce, though and appeals to us in many other ways, as well.

For one thing, it's got that wonderful naturalism which is characteristic of Shakespeare's work though it isn't characteristic of farce at all. And, indeed, one might argue that this play is the most naturalistic of all he wrote. Yes, all of his settings and all of the people who inhabit them reflect the reality of his own time and place (as well as that of any time and place), but the setting and people of Merry Wives are the only ones that actually do belong to Shakespeare's own Elizabethan England.

The characters may be based on types - types from life and types from literature - but each is made into an individual, and one who might really have walked the streets of Windsor, and one who might really have talked there, too. For it's the talking that does make these individuals as individual as they are - and as Elizabethan. No other play by Shakespeare can claim such richly realistic dialogue (or so little poetry, so much prose); no other has language which is this fresh and vivid and colloquial. The play's first patrons must have felt that they were looking at and listening to themselves (or their neighbors), and the play gives us a terrific opportunity to look at and listen to them, too. Almost as though they were real. And yet, of course, they (and the world they inhabit) have been invented, if invented with artistry of such skill that it hardly shows. The cardboard caricatures of farce have been given flesh and blood (and mind and heart and soul). They have been made into fully human beings. And, more remarkable still, they have been made into beings whose humanity isn't lost as they assume the significance Shakespeare has assigned them in the carefully patterned structure of the whole. Their meaning doesn't rob them of their credibility.

STRUCTURE AND SIGNIFICANCE

"Carefully pattered structure?" "Meaning?" Even in this lightweight little romp of a comedy? Yes, indeed. And though they, too, have been hidden by that are which so artfully hides itself, people who spend any time with the play discover them soon enough. Consider the following comment upon the mastery with which the play is made by John Wilders, the man who served as Literary Consultant for the BBC/TV productions of all of Shakespeare's plays:

"[Shakespeare's] skill in construction can...be seen in the links and connections he has made between the various characters."

"The comic Frenchman Caius is a kind of twin to the comic Welshman Evans. The former, a doctor, is a curer of bodies and the other, a parson, a curer of souls...the symmetry of the construction extends further. Fenton, the eligible suitor for the hand of Anne Page, is obviously contrasted with her two ridiculous suitors, and young Fenton's pursuit of Anne for love is contrasted with old Falstaff's pursuit of Mistress Ford [and Mistress Page] for... money. It is therefore especially appropriate that these two parallel wooing plots converge and are resolved simultaneously in the final scene in Windsor forest where Falstaff is finally and publicly exposed, the wives are shown to be faithful and Anne wins the man she loves."

What could be neater than that, and what could better make the points that Shakespeare would make here, points about folly and wisdom, knavery and virtue?

Furthermore, Wilders' comment actually only notes a few of the "links and connections" which give this play its structure and significance. There characters and situations that somehow serve as foils to one another are more numerous still. We might compare and contrast Falstaff and Ford, both of whom would like to find Mistress Ford guilty of adultery. Or how about Ford and page, the jealous husband and the trusting one. Or Ford and Caius, who suffers from jealousy, too.

Then there are the cozeners who intrigue against others, those who play roles and wear disguises, of a more or less literal sort. This category would seem to include everyone in the play, though special mention should probably go to the merry wives and Falstaff and Ford. And what of Mistress Quickly? She may be there busiest go-between in Windsor, but she certainly isn't the only one. Nor is she the only one who might be called by an uglier name -

like pimp or bawd. She might be called a whore, as well, given her relationship with Doctor Caius. So how does she relate (in every sense) to the other, respectable women of the town? How (in fact) do all of the ostensibly respectable relate to those who ostensibly aren't? How do members of the middle class relate to those of higher or lower birth, those of a different background and different values? How do old relate to young, parents to children, men to women, masters to servants? And then there are matters of philosophy. How do the passionate relate to the reasonable, the spiritual to the corporal, the romantic to the pragmatic, the merry to the melancholy or angry or bitter?

A THEORY OF RELATIVITY

To answer these questions (and to formulate others which are just as relevant), all we need to do is compare and contrast everyone in the play with everyone else in it. And that isn't really difficult to do. Not when Shakespeare has structured his play to enable us to do exactly that. Each juxtaposition of one scene with another, each confrontation of one character with another, raises issues, rouses feelings, shapes opinions, all of which shift and then shift again, as the play goes on. He (or she) who looks good at one moment may look bad the next. In another context. From another perspective. Our view broadens, as do our insight, our sympathy. And the distance from which we watch comedy anyway furthers the process, which is gradually turning our aesthetic detachment into a sort of ethic or philosophy. We gradually come to see that everyone is good and bad, simultaneously. And we gradually come to accept that fact with genial equanimity. Even those of them who are the worst - even they can be seen to be admirable in some way (or sympathetic, sometimes, at the very least). And vice versa, too.

Thus do the shifting perspectives produced by Shakespeare's artistry entice us into just such relativity - just such awareness and acceptance of complexities and ambiguities - as (I would argue) this play (like most of his plays) recommends to us all. And it's recommended not only as the way to view drama but also as the way to live life (on stage and off). We learn what the characters learn. There are no absolutes by which we might judge others. And if we try to do so, we'll be shallow, indeed. Rather we should forgive one another for the flaws which characterize our common humanity. Even flaws as huge as Falstaff's. As Page says at the end of the play, "What cannot be eschew'd must be embrac'd." Only so can we all enjoy "merry days" - and merry nights.

A SYNOPSIS OF THE PLAY

Act I. Scene I: The elderly Justice Shallow, a Windsor magistrate, and his young country cousin, Slender, seek out the disreputable knight Sir John Falstaff at the home of Master George Page. The rascally old rogue has stolen a deer from Shallow's estate, and Shallow and Slender want revenge. Parson Hugh Evans, who's with them, wants peace, however, and he suggests they use the occasion to make a match between Slender and Page's daughter, Anne, who's as well endowed with money as she is with looks. Page is all for peace as well, and he puts an end to the argument between Falstaff and Shallow by inviting everyone in to dinner (to enjoy the very deer that Falstaff stole). Slender, who has little appetite for love or food, reluctantly agrees to marry Anne, and even more reluctantly agrees to join the rest at the table, though he's "not a-hungry" at all.

Act I Scene ii: Sir Hugh sends Slender's servant, Simple, to seek out Mistress Quickly, the woman who looks after Doctor Caius to ask if she'll act as a go-between, as she loves to do and "solicit" Anne on Slender's behalf.

Act I Scene iii: Falstaff wants his servants to act as go-betweens, too. He plans to "make love" to Anne's mother, Mistress Page, and to her friend, Mistress Ford, also. He's convinced that they'll pay him for his services so he can make money as well as love. Pistol and Nym refuse his request to deliver letters to the two wives, however. They may be almost as rascally as their master, but they draw the line at pimping or pandering. And when Falstaff angrily dismisses them, they decide to get revenge by telling Page and Ford about Falstaff's plan to seduce their wives.

Act I Scene iv. Mistress Quickly welcomes Simple and agrees to the parson's request that she speak to Anne on Slender's behalf. Doctor Caius' sudden return home soon interrupts the scene, however, and fearful of her master's jealousy, Mistress Quickly hides Simple in a bedroom. When Caius finds him, he does, indeed, go "horn-mad," sure that the boy has made him a cuckold. Then, when he learns what Simple is actually there for, he goes "horn-mad" all over again, though this time he's ready to kill Sir Hugh rather than Simple. And why? Because (we learn) he wants to marry Anne Page himself. To calm him, Mistress Quickly agrees to speak to Anne on his behalf as well. Finally, she says she'll help Fenton, a handsome young gentleman who's given up the rather wild life he was leading in the court and in the city, hanging out with rogues like Falstaff, and who's come to Windsor where he's fallen in love with Anne.

Act II Scene i.: Mistress Page and Mistress Ford discuss the letters that both of them have received from Falstaff. Apparently, the fat old rogue sees himself as a handsome young gentleman, and one who may hope for even more than Fenton does - they love not one but two respectable Windsor women. As amused as they are angry at his idiocy and effrontery, they decide to seek revenge upon him by leading him on, using Mistress Quickly as their go-between. In the meantime, Nym and Pistol do indeed tell Page and Ford just what Falstaff plans. And while Page finds it funny, Ford does not. He is (we learn) at least as subject to jealousy as is Doctor Caius. He thinks Page is a "fool" to trust his wife, and he plans to approach Falstaff in a disguise that will enable him to spy on him and on his own wife, as well. The "merry" Host of the Garter (where Falstaff is staying) promises to help Ford to this - as soon as he's done enjoying the "sport" that the duel to which Doctor Caius has challenged Parson Evans is surely going to provide.

Act II Scene ii. While Falstaff is again berating Pistol for having refused to act as a go-between, Mistress Quickly arrives upon the scene with word that Mistress Ford will welcome a visit from Falstaff while her jealous husband is away from home. She adds that Mistress Page will see him sometime, too. And he believes her. Why not? As Mistress Quickly says, he has "charms." He gives her money and sends her off again - "one of Cupid's carriers." Then Ford appears, disguised as a man called Brook who's willing to give Falstaff money to act as a kind of Cupid for him. He (Brook) wants Falstaff to succeed in seducing Mistress Ford so that he (Brook) may then seduce her, too, so that he (Ford) can prove how untrustworthy she is to all who think that Ford is a fool to be so jealous! Falstaff says he'll be glad to make Ford (Brook) a cuckold. And he promises Brook (Ford), "Thou shalt lie with [Ford's] wife," too. By the time the deal is done, Ford is practically frothing at the mouth, muttering about the revenge he'll take on Falstaff.

Act II Scene iii: Doctor Caius is muttering about revenge, as well, still hoping to kill Sir Hugh for interfering with his plans to marry Anne Page. The parson hasn't appeared to fight the duel, though, and when the Host appears, with Shallow and Page in tow, it's to plead with the doctor to forgo the duel (even as they tease him about his ferocity).

Act III Scene i. Here the furious Caius and the terrified Evans finally do come face to face, but (as everyone has actually expected) they fight with words rather than swords. They "keep their limbs whole and hack our English" - as only a Frenchman and a Welshman can hack it. When the Host and the others have had their "sport" listening, they force the doctor and parson, the "soul-curer and body-curer," the "celestial" and "terrestrial," into an uneasy accord. They all head to the Inn to celebrate the peace by sharing a few cups of sack.

Act III Scene ii.: Before they can get to the Inn, though, they run into Ford, whose intentions are anything but peaceful. He's about to interrupt the assignation Falstaff has made with his wife, and he wants them to come along and witness the fact that she and Mistress Page, too, are acting like whores, making him and Page, too, cuckolds, with horns like Actaeon's. Shallow and Slender decide to visit Page's house, instead, since Page has said he approves of Slender's suit to Anne (for Slender has a lot of land), even though he knows his wife prefers the doctor (for Caius has a lot of money). And what of Anne's third suitor, Fenton? When the Host

inquires about that young man's chances, Page attacks him as a fortune-seeking wastrel who wants Anne for her wealth alone and who won't get a penny if he should just run off with her.

Act III Scene iii: Falstaff arrives at Ford's house to have his way with Mistress Ford, but she and Mistress Page are ready to have their way with him. He no sooner starts to speak of love than Mistress Page bursts in upon them, warning that the jealous husband is at hand. (Little does she know he really is!) They get the frightened Falstaff to hide in a huge basket of filthy clothes, and they're just having it lugged out of door (to be dumped into the nearby Thames) when Ford does indeed appear and begin to tear the house apart. "Search, seek, find out!" But he and those he's brought with him find nothing, of course and he's forced to apologize for his behavior - and offer everyone dinner, as well. The wives are delighted with their success; "We'll leave a proof," they say, "by that which we will do,/Wives may be merry, and yet honest too."

Act III Scene iv. Anne and Fenton come on stage together, discussing their love for one another and her parents' opposition to it. He admits he was first attracted to her wealth, but insists that now it's the "riches" of her very self he wants. Their talk is interrupted when Shallow and Slender arrive, with Mistress Quickly (of course) to act as go-between. Though Shallow tries to speak to Anne on his feeble cousin's behalf, she asks that Slender speak for himself. What does he want with her? All he can say is, "for mine own part, I would little or nothing with you. Your father and my uncle have made motions." And indeed when her father comes on stage, he sneers at Fenton and welcomes Slender as a "son." Anne's mother is rude to Fenton, too, though she says Doctor Caius will make the "better husband." Only Mistress Quickly is left to speak kindly of Fenton, but even she can't really press his cause since she's promised to press the causes of both the other suitors, as well. And she means to be "as good as [her] word."

Act III Scene v. Falstaff is still bemoaning being "thrown into the Thames" when Mistress Quickly (who else?) hustles in to tell him that Mistress Ford wants another assignation. He agrees, in spite of everything, and when Ford soon follows, again disguised as Brook, Falstaff takes great delight in explaining just how Ford's wife smuggled him out of the house, right under the nose of her jealous husband. And he explains, too, that he'll visit the house again, not only to use Mistress Ford himself, but to ready her for Master Brook: "You" (he tells him) "shall cuckold Ford." Ford is left so furious that he feels "horn-mad."

Act IV. Scene ii. It's déjà vu. No sooner does Mistress Ford welcome Falstaff to her home than Mistress Page is once again amongst them, warning that a furious Ford is on his way. (And once again, she's supposed to be lying, although, once again, she isn't). This time they tell Falstaff that he will die unless he disguises himself as the fat old woman of Brainford. And to further confuse matters (and Ford especially) they pile dirty clothes in another basket. When Ford does arrive, with his witnesses behind him, he's sure he's going to be able to prove his "jealousy is reasonable." He's sure he'll be able to shame his wife and himself - right in front of everyone. But again his efforts are disappointed. There's no one in the basket, no one in the house, except the old woman of Brainford, a "witch," a cozening whore whom he hates so much that he beats her up before he sends her away. This pleases Mistress Ford and Mistress Page to no end. Their visitors are witnesses, all right, but witnesses to their virtue and wait and Master Ford's disgrace and folly. They decide to forgive Ford and tell him and Page and others the whole story. Then they may all decide whether Falstaff should be further and still more "publicly sham'd" before they forgive him, too. The scene ends with Falstaff soliloquizing about all he has suffered already as the old woman of Brainford: "I would all the world might be cozen'd, for I have been cozen'd and beaten too." Perhaps (he even thinks) he should "repent" for his behavior? But naaah! He still isn't ready to do so.

Act IV. Scene iv. The Fords (reconciled now Ford as apologized), the Pages, and Parson Evans discuss their plot to make "public sport" of Falstaff, a plot which will bring him to Windsor Forest at midnight, disguised as a local legend, Herne the Hunter, "with huge horns on his head." There Anne and William Page and other village children dressed as fairies will pinch him

into confession and repentance. Even the parson will help. As he says, "It is admirable pleasure and fery honest knaveries." And the Pages are planning other knaveries, too, all with the best intentions, of course. Page will arrange for Slender to steal Anne away upon this same occasion. Mistress Page will arrange for the doctor to do the same.

Act IV Scene v. Falstaff is still complaining about the beating he took as the old woman of Brainford, but when Mistress Quickly arrives to invite him to the midnight assignation in the woods, he accepts the invitation readily. At last (he thinks) he will achieve his goal.

Act IV Scene vi. Fenton tells the Host about the community's plot against Falstaff - and about her parents' two plots against Anne. He asks the Host to help him save his beloved from Slender and Caius both. He will steal Anne away during the scene in the forest if the Host will "procure the vicar" who can marry them immediately.

Act V. Scene i. Falstaff is preparing to head for the forest (Mistress Quickly has promised him with "a pair of horns") when Ford arrives, again disguised as Brook, to hear how Falstaff was beaten in his last disguise ("I knew not what 'twas to be beaten till lately") and how he intends to "be reveng'd" upon them all in his next disguise as Herne.

Act V. Scene ii. Scene iii. Scene iv. Page confirms his plans with Slender, Mistress Page confirms her plans with Caius, and Parson Evans (who's got himself up as a satyr!) gets the fairies ready to perform the little play-within-a-play which is the plan that everyone (but Falstaff) shares.

Act V Scene v. The drama the merry wives have planned begins as Falstaff enters the midnight forest "with a buck's head upon him," talking about the way that love (or lust) can make "a man a beast." He is, he says, a "Windsor stag," ready for "rut-time," and when he hears a hound he inquires, "Who comes here? My doe?" Mistress Ford answers, "[A]rt thou there, my deer?" When he learns that Mistress Page has come with her, he isn't daunted. There's plenty of him to go around. "Divide me like a brib'd buck, each a haunch." But before he can "bequeath" his horns to their husbands, the fairies are upon him and the women run away.

Pistol (disguised as Hobgoblin or Puck) and Mistress Quickly (Queen of the Fairies) have joined the Evans and the others who now torment the fallen Falstaff, to punish him for his corruption, reciting fairy verse the while: "Fie on lust and luxury!/Pinch him for his villainy!" Meanwhile, Slender and Caius and Fenton each steal a veiled figure from the scene.

Finally, the Fords, the Pages, and the others reveal themselves and their trick to Falstaff. "Now, good Sir John, (asks Mistress Page) how like you Windsor wives?" "Now, sir, (ask Ford) who's a cuckold now?" Falstaff has to admit that they've made a fool of him. "I am dejected. I am not able to answer." He only cheers up a bit when Page invites him home to help them all celebrate Slender's marriage to Anne. Or will it be Caius' marriage to Anne, as Mistress Page expects it to be? Neither, it seems. For Slender arrives to complain that he's been cozened - he has almost married a boy! And Caius comes along complaining that he has married a boy indeed!

Only when Anne and Fenton appear to announce that they are man and wife do Anne's parents understand that each of them has been subject to some well-deserved cozening, too. They tried to marry their daughter "most shamefully," where there was wealth, but "where there was no proportion held in love." They freely admit their folly, though, and welcome Fenton into the family, making Anne the merriest (as well as the newest) of the merry wives of Windsor. And everyone (even Falstaff) heads happily for the Pages' where (we are sure) more merriment will ensue.

"CURSES, FOILED AGAIN"

SIR JOHN FALSTAFF AND THE MERRY WIVES

Though Falstaff was not an historical figure, he does appear first in one of Shakespeare's history plays, Henry the Fourth, Part One (1596-1597). When that play opens, Falstaff is a figure who seems to have supplanted Henry in his soon Hal's affections even as he has

succeeded in luring Hal away from the world of the court and into the world of the tavern where he reigns supreme. There he indulges the appetites that he so hugely embodies, and there, too, he exercises the wit that is just as enormous as his girth. This fat man is wonderfully funny, as quick of mind (and mouth) as he is slow of foot. And we can understand what Hal sees in Falstaff: life itself, lived to the fullest.

The result is a sort of saturnalia, though, an anarchic and amoral pursuit of pleasure (such as that in the Old Comedy of Aristophanes, one of the great Greek dramatists). And a little saturnalia goes a long way, especially when those involved cannot live entirely within the confines of a tavern, or within the confines of a comedy, but must venture into the court and even onto the battlefield and there enact the roles that history has assigned them.

It turns out that Hal understands this perfectly. Even in 1 Henry IV, he knows that he can't long countenance Falstaff's attempt to take over his life and take over the play and turn them both into Aristophanic comedy. He knows that he'll soon be Henry V, and if he's to perform that party as well as he intends to, he can't be a clown with a clown by his side. If he's to act a comic part at all, it'll have to be a respectable, even heroic part, a part from New Comedy rather than from Old, a part like that of the protagonist of all those post-Aristophanic plays in which a clever young man triumphs over a foolish old one, comes into his inheritance, marries and assumes his proper place in a proper world. To do this, Hal will have to reject Falstaff - and all that Falstaff stands for - the good as well as the bad, the fun as well as the folly, the huge humanity of the man as well as his undeniable knavery.

And in 2 Henry IV (1598), Hal does just as he must and will. He banishes Falstaff, who is stunned to discover that he's been made the scapegoat in this ongoing drama, though perhaps he should have known that his sacrifice would be necessary if his erstwhile friend and fellow reveler were ever to become one of the best kings England has ever known - as he certainly does - in Henry V (1599) - in which play we hear that Falstaff has died, off stage, a poor, broken, babbling old man who has never seen Hal again.

A COMMAND PERFORMANCE

People didn't want Falstaff banished from the stage, however - people in the plays and people at the plays. People wanted to see more of him. Even Queen Elizabeth herself! She supposedly persuaded Shakespeare to give this great comic character yet another lease on life! And this time, Shakespeare was to "show him in love." The result? The Merry Wives of Windsor. The latest scholarship suggests that the play was probably written in 1597 for performance before the Queen at a ceremony honoring those recently elected to the Knights of the Garter, a group that could certainly afford to laugh at the unknighly antics of Sir John Falstaff.

Of course, those who inhabit the world of The Merry Wives are less delighted with Falstaff's appearance amongst them than those in their audience must have been. They are respectable citizens, after all, members of a respectable little middle-class community. And he is a most disreputable knight who's left the court and the city (and the high life and the low life that he there enjoyed) to invade their moral, social, and geographical territory.

What does he want there? What he's always wanted. Everything he craves. Love (or sex, at least) and money. Food and drink (especially sack). And all the fun that can be had from making fools of others. In a word, he's after saturnalia, just as he was in the history plays. He hopes to turn Windsor topsy-turvy, disrupt order, corrupt virtue, and then enjoy the anarchic amorality. He hopes to take over the play as well as the town, and turn them both into a version of Old Comedy.

THE TABLES TURNED

The merry wives, however, while not opposed to merriment, have quite another sort of merriment in mind. Sure, they'll play playfully the whorish roles that Falstaff has assigned to them, but in the process, they will seize the comic initiative. They will control the plot, not he. And they will see to it that Falstaff plays the fool - in something like a parody of that saturnalian comedy in which he had planned to play the lead. Every time he thinks he's going to have his way with them, they have their way with him instead.

One might say that they, in their prototypical sisterhood, triumph over the proto-typical male chauvinist pig. And one might say that they leave him impotent - or worse. As one provocative critic has written, "the feminization of comic pleasure [which we see here] entails the curtailing of Falstaff's male monopoly of the field of the comic. The domestication of

[saturnalian] comedy, the transfer of comic energies to the women, requires the emasculation of Falstaff. And that is precisely what happens in *The Merry Wives*, the only play in the canon, incidentally, where a man is ridiculed in the disguise of a woman" (Nevo 153).

Nor is that the worst that happens to him. The horning and dis-horning that Falstaff suffers at the climax of the play can be seen as a "symbolic castration" (154). He's planned a wild night of revelry in the woods - and where might one better revel wildly - but it turns out that these woods of Windsor might as well be the local parish hall. After all, what ensures there is no orgy or animality but a well-rehearsed performance of a text which the local parson has written with the help of the merry wives. And this play-within-the-play presents a mere pretense of Falstaff's night of revelry and then punishes him for the fun he hasn't had in a fashion which is all-too-real.

So much for Saturnalia. And so much for Old Comedy. As the fairies (who aren't fairies) sing: "Fie on sinful Fantasy!/Fie on lust and luxury." "The merry wives [have defended] social order against uncontrolled sex" (Roberts, quoted in Nevo 154). Falstaff (who's been made a scapegoat once again) says that he has learned his lesson. And the citizens of Windsor invite him home for dinner.

But wait. There is another lesson to be learned. And this time it's the teachers who must be taught that they, too, have acted "shamefully." The merry wives (and their husbands and friends) must be made to see that sex too controlled can be a threat to the social order, too. "[F]orce marriage" prompted by financial consideration - marriage such as the Pages have planned for their daughter, Anne - such a marriage is just as "cursed" in its way as the "lust and luxury" that Falstaff had planned for himself.

It is to make this point that Fenton and Anne finally take the control of their lives and the control of the play into their capable hands. They slip away and marry, in spite of their elders' objections. And they thereby turn the Old comedy which Falstaff had intended to perform, the saturnalia whose performance their elders have prevented into a New Comedy instead - a comedy to suit themselves. They won't stay in the subplot any longer. They will step forward to claim the mainplot roles that seem to them to be their due. They will become the hero and heroine of their version of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, with Anne as the merriest wife of them all.

"MERRY WIVES" AND THE DRAMATIC GENRES: LOOKING AT COMEDY, LIVING THROUGH TRAGEDY

One thinks of these genres as essentially different, of course, especially in the ways they end, the former happily, the latter unhappily. And yet these genres - and the Shakespearean versions of them - some of which we will mention here - actually have a lot in common - thanks to their common origin in the religious rituals of ancient Greece (which were like the rituals of ancient anywhere). Critic Northrop Frye has described those rituals as involving "the struggle, death, and rebirth of a God-Man, which is linked to the yearly triumph of spring over winter."

The drama which developed from such ceremonies of sacrifice developed then in two directions, with tragedy emphasizing the hero's struggle and death, and comedy his less arduous struggle, less literal death, and rebirth (again, of a non-literal sort). It follows (as Frye explains) that "tragedy is really implicit or uncompleted comedy" and that "comedy contains a potential tragedy within itself."

Shakespearean tragedy may, in fact, incorporate obviously comic characters and scenes (think of the Gravediggers in *Hamlet* or the Porter in *Macbeth*). His tragic heroes usually achieve some insight (a fact which pleases us) before they die. And though we don't get to see what's going to ensue when their lives and their plays are over, we are often left with the satisfactory impression that their societies will benefit somewhere from their deaths.

On the other hand, Shakespearean comedy often comes very close to tragedy, indeed. His characters may find themselves extremely unhappy before they reach those happy endings (and occasionally, a character in a comedy doesn't reach such a happy ending, at all - think of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* or Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*).

Certainly, the plot most typical of Shakespearean comedy (as of most comedy in the western world) frequently appears in Shakespearean tragedy, too. Parents - and in particular fathers - don't want their daughters to marry as they will. Think of *Hamlet* and Ophelia (and Polonius).

Othello and Desdemona (and Brabantio). And of course, Romeo and Juliet. But Romeo and Juliet could just as easily have found themselves in a comedy as do those comparable characters Fenton and Anne, who fall in love in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. And Fenton and Anne could just as easily have found themselves in a tragedy.

So what accounts for the fact that Fenton and Anne do live and do (we presume) live happily ever after, as well? And what accounts for the fact that Romeo and Juliet don't? Not surprisingly, the answer is: the difference between comedy and tragedy. And that difference has to do not only with the different ways that plays of these two genres end, but also with the different ways that character and fate combine to bring those ends about.

CHARACTER AND FATE

In tragedy, the emphasis is upon character (in every sense of the word). We watch the hero make the mistakes that doom him. And, in fact, because we identify with the hero (and/or the heroine) of tragedy, we feel as though we are not merely watching; we feel as though we, too, are living through the experience portrayed on the stage, making those same mistakes and dying for them. Why do the mistakes get made? Because the hero (and/or heroine) suffers from some tragic flaw. And that flaw is often hubris, an excess of that pride that can make one blind to dangerous truths about oneself and others. (Think of the way that Julius Caesar's blindness leads directly to his downfall - and think of the way that Brutus and Cassius suffer from their blindness, too. Think of Othello and Lear (and Gloucester). Though one might well argue that the good Hamlet and the bad Macbeth both suffer as prodigiously as they do because they are not blind enough.)

It is true that we always also feel the force of fate working in a tragedy. That is, we sense (we may even know) that the hero's fate has been predetermined. Nonetheless, he must seem to bring that fate upon himself. It must seem to issue from his character, of his own free will. Should it not - should he seem, instead, to be an essentially innocent victim of powers well beyond his control - he would be pathetic, yes, but tragic, not at all. We might regard his death with pity and fear, as we would if he'd been flattened by a huge Mack truck. But we wouldn't really take that death to heart, as we do the death of a tragic hero. Then our pity and fear grow so intense that we finally explode in that curiously positive purgation of feeling which Aristotle called catharsis.

Character and fate seem to conspire together in the plots of comedy, too. But this time the emphasis is on the latter. And this time we call the latter something a little less ominous-sounding than "fate"; this time we call it "comic-providence." The audience of a comedy knows from the start that everything is going to work out well in the end. We know that "God's in his heaven," and the playwright's in his study, and we trust the two of them to (sooner or later) make all "right with the world" on stage.

SURROGATE CREATORS

Of course, Shakespeare often allows a character in a comedy to help him and providence achieve the happy ending. He often creates a character who assumes such creative control of the play which he or she is in that the character seems like a sort of God and/or a sort of Shakespeare. These God and/or Shakespeare-surrogates plot and plan, just like their creators, to bring things to a satisfactory conclusion, and because they're enacting the will of their creators, they may very well succeed. Think of Oberon, King of the Fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Prospero the mighty magician of Shakespeare's last play, *The Tempest*. And think, too, of those who have no supernatural power but still have power enough to do the good that helps to turn their plays into comedies, those like Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* or Rosalind in *As You Like It*.

True, there are also times when the would-be Gods and Shakespeares (whom we find in the tragedies as well as the comedies) fail to pull off what they've planned. In the comedies, which will work out well anyway, their failure is cause for much amusement (as is Falstaff's in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*). In the tragedies, it is usually cause for much relief (though we grieve over that in which they have succeeded and those whom they have thereby destroyed; think of Iago; think of Macbeth).

WATCHING COMEDY

Of course, most comic characters don't even attempt to wield the sort of power that's been

described above. That's just as well. They may not have tragic flaws, but they certainly have comic ones, in great variety and abundance (though hubris or pride - and the blindness attendant upon it - may head the list of comic flaws even as it heads the list of tragic ones). With these flaws they threaten to make messes of their lives and they would surely do so, were providence and playwright not determined to save them from themselves. We don't have to worry about them, though, since we know they will be saved. And we can relax and laugh at things that might not seem too funny in our neighbors or ourselves. We can (in short) enjoy the comic version of the tragic catharsis, a catharsis which (in this instance) depends not upon our involvement with the characters, but upon our lack of involvement with them.

For when we watch comedy, we really do watch it. We are onlookers who look on from a distance, with the sort of detachment that makes the experience an intellectual rather than an emotional one.

The intensity of identification with those on stage, the thrill of vicarious living in that on-stage world: these are the stuff of tragedy, not comedy. As has been well observed: "Comedy is for those who think; tragedy is for those who feel."

MUCH ADO ABOUT "MERRY WIVES" SOME SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES AND TOPICS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. **DRAMATIC IRONY.** This is the term for the situation that occurs when those in the audience of a play know more than the characters in it do, a situation which gives us a lot of pleasure when we're watching a comedy, and a lot of pain when tragedy is involved (though the pain we experience watching a tragedy is itself a pleasure of a kind). Watching those on stage suffer from an ignorance which we don't share can be quite exquisitely excruciating. And the satisfaction that we feel when plays of either sort conclude has much to do with the fact that, in those conclusions, the character (the leading ones, at least) finally achieve a level of understanding that equals (or approximates) our own. The blind begin to see. And even we may come to see more than we saw before (for sometimes it turns out that some of a play's irony has been at our expense, also).

That Shakespeare is a master of dramatic irony is apparent in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and you might wish to consider the many scenes in which the master does exploit gaps in awareness between us and the characters and between the characters themselves. Consider, too, the way same device works in other plays you probably know: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, and *Macbeth*.

2. **THE GREEN WORLD.** This is a term that critics use to refer to that other world, that natural (and yet somehow extraordinary) world, which we find in so many Shakespeare plays that begin in the ordinary (and yet somehow unnatural) world of court or city or town. As characters move from the one to the other (from, for instance the Athens of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to the woods nearby, or from Duke Frederick's court in *As You Like It* to the forest of Arden), questions of real significance arise. Are our centers of civilization as civilized as we like to think? Are they (perhaps) too civilized? Should we repress all our animal instincts, even when they constitute half our human nature? Or should we allow ourselves to behave more animally, more naturally, than we normally do, in order to be fully human beings?

In the comedies, those who enter the green world usually benefit from the experience. Loves come together. Conflicts are resolved. And when characters return to their original setting, as they do at the play's end, or as they soon will, it's clear that their society is going to benefit, too, that it will somehow be renewed. As Northrop Frye has said, "[t]he green world charges the comedies with a symbolism in which the comic resolution contains a suggestion of the old ritual pattern of the victory of summer over winter," youth over age, life over death. Consider the way the green world (of Windsor Forest) works in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. And if you're familiar with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, you might compare the green world sequence there with the one in *Merry Wives*. It's interesting how much the latter (with its fake fairies) seems like a parody of the former (where the fairies are very real, indeed).

Interesting, too, is the fact that in the tragedies, characters may have nowhere green to escape from the structures of their society but the nearest walled garden, and, of course, such

escape as that provides - and such happiness - in minimal. Think of the Capulet's garden in Verona, or Brutus' garden at his home in Rome. These tragedies are filled with garden imagery, too, used usually to emphasize the fact that the world of these play is a fallen world, a ruined Eden, a blasted garden from which there is no escape at all. Hamlet and Macbeth have such imagery. And Macbeth and King Lear also turn such imagery into an actual setting, namely the horribly ungreen world of the heath in those two plays.

3. **THE PLAY-WITHIN-THE-PLAY:** One of Shakespeare's favorite dramatic devices is the play-within-the-play. Often in his work we come upon one of those wonderfully complex scenes in which we watch characters, who are, of course, unaware that they are characters, playing the role of characters, in a play in the play, on a stage on the stage, while other characters, who also think that they're not, watch the performance as though they weren't performing, as though they were just members of an audience, like us, if that is, indeed, what we are... The mind boggles, doesn't it? And it boggles even more when we notice how often the play-within-the-play bears a close resemblance to the play it is within. Think of the performance of Pyramus and Thisbe with which *A Midsummer Night's Dream* concludes. Think of *The Murder of Gonzago* in *Hamlet*. And think, especially, of the little play at the end of *Merry Wives*. It's so rich in complication (and implication) that it's not even easy to tell whose play it is, and what genre it belongs to, and who's acting in it, and who's merely watching.

Worth considering, too, are other scenes earlier in *Merry Wives* where there's a lot of acting going on, for even though they cannot be considered full-fledged plays-within-the-play, they almost are, and they work in very similar ways. So do similar scenes in *Romeo and Juliet* (where Juliet acts dead all too persuasively) and *Julius Caesar* (where the conspirators, who've only pretended to be friends with Caesar, forget that he might only be pretending to be friends with them) and *Macbeth* (where husband and wife have a hard time sustaining their roles as innocents).

The plays are chock full of actors, or actors playing people who act all the time, whether they're in a play-within-the-play or not. And why? Well, after all, as Jacques says in *As You Like It*, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players."

WAYS TO PLAY WITH THE PLAY

1. Suppose you're going to direct *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and suppose you've decided to do as many directors do (and as the Atlanta Shakespeare company does not); update the play - set it in a time and place closer to (or even identical with) our own. Windsor could be a little town outside Chicago in the 1930's or New York in the 1950's or Atlanta in the 1990's. Or wherever and whenever you please. Discuss the production that would result.

2. Suppose some Hollywood bigwigs are making a movie of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and suppose you've been asked to cast the parts. Discuss the performers you might choose, not forgetting to consider how different choices for important parts might make a real difference in the feel of the whole.

3. These same Hollywood bigwigs have asked you to provide the sort of score that will make their movie a blockbuster. And since you don't write music yourself, they've given you the freedom and the funds to buy the rights to anything anyone else had done.

Discuss the score you'd put together if you could indeed compose one out of other people's work. What theme song(s) would be appropriate? What songs might suit particular characters and scenes?

SUGGESTIONS FOR READING

All of the good editions of Shakespeare's works contain helpful bibliographies of books and articles one might read seeking information on his life, times, criticism of his plays, and discussion of productions of those plays for stage or film. Many bibliographies have been published under separate cover, too. And David Bevington's *Shakespeare*, one of the *Goldentree Bibliographies in Language and Literature (AHM)*, an excellent example of these, is readily available in paperback. There's no point in duplicating here what can so easily be found elsewhere. All I want to do is offer a few suggestions of stuff that seems to me to be especially readable (and stuff which is, again, available in paperback).

There is, for example, F.E. Halliday's *Shakespeare* (Thames and Hudson), a lively (if scholarly) and lavishly illustrated biographical study, which has the added virtue of being short. More

recent and more substantial biographies included *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life* by S. Schoenbaum (Oxford University Press) and *The Life and Times of William Shakespeare* by Peter Levi (Macmillan). And some of you might enjoy the bawdy, brilliant fictionalized biography, *Nothing Like the Sun* (Ballantine), in which Anthony Burgess tells the story of Shakespeare's love life, *Dark Lady* and all.

The best of the basic critical studies may be *An Approach to Shakespeare* by D.A. Traversi, who traces themes and techniques through all thirty-seven plays in this useful and manageable two-volume work (Doubleday Anchor). A really exciting discussion of comedy as a genre (and of related matters of gender) can be found in Ruth Nevo's *Comic Transformation in Shakespeare* (Methuen); the approach is more critically sophisticated and much trendier than Traversi's, but the result is sensible and accessible anyway.

Collections of criticism by many different writers are usually well worth the reader's time, too; only the best stuff is selected for these volumes, and it's usually stuff of a valuable variety.

One such volume, *Modern Shakespearean Criticism*, edited by Alvin B. Kernan, contains what is (in my opinion) that best thing ever written on Shakespeare's history plays (and on Falstaff's role in them), Kernan's own essay, "The Henriad: Shakespeare's Major History Plays" (Harcourt, Brace and World). It also has wonderful essays on *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*. Another truly excellent collection is *Essays in Shakespearean Criticism*, edited by James L. Calderwood and Holder E. Toliver (Prentice-Hall); its essays on *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth* are (again) wonderful, and it also contains "The Augment of Comedy," Northrop Frye's fine essay on the comic genre from which I quote a bit above.

I would also encourage everyone to seek out some of the many books containing comments on the plays by people who've been involved in productions of them; actors and directors may see things quite differently than critics who are merely critics so, especially if those critics forget that the text, the play on the page, isn't really the play at all I'd recommend

Shakespeare in Perspective, edited by Roger Sales, the two-volume collection of television and radio talks by critics and actors that were given in conjunction with the BBC TV productions of the plays (Ariel Books/BBC). Also extremely interesting is *New Prefaces to Shakespeare*, in which John Wilders, the Literary Consultant who worked behind the scenes in all the BBC productions, offers his comments on every one of the plays (BBC Books/Blackwell).

Finally those of you who enjoy reading mysteries will certainly enjoy the Elizabethan Whodunits by Edward Marston, whose well-researched and entertaining tales involved just such a company of actors as that to which Shakespeare himself belonged.

SUGGESTIONS FOR VIEWING

Some wonderful movie versions of the history plays, which deal with Prince Hal and his boon companion Falstaff, are available on video. They include *Chimes at Midnight*, that conflation of the Henry plays and *Merry Wives* in which Orson Welles (who also directed) plays Falstaff. And no one should miss the *Henry V*, which Laurence Olivier directed and starred in in 1946 or that which Kenneth Branagh directed and starred in in 1989; even people with no interest in Shakespeare or in English history find these two films about Hal's successes as the great warrior-king to be terrifically entertaining. Finally there's *Falstaff*, the opera which Verdi based upon *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. Blockbuster Video lists three different versions of this acknowledged masterpiece.

VOCABULARY BUILDING

As it happens, *Merry Wives* is a play full of characters that have trouble with language (and trouble, consequently, with communication). *Mistress Quickly* is the original Mrs. Malaprop, misusing words almost as badly as does that character from Sheridan's later play, *The Rivals*. And *Parson Evans*, the Welshman, and *Doctor Caius*, the Frenchman, mispronounce most of what they say.

Those of you who'd like to avoid misusing and/or mispronouncing words yourselves can work on the problem by working on those words in this very study guide with which you may not be familiar, words like *pander*, *berate*, *wastrel*, *effrontery*, *ostensible*, *pragmatic*, *girth*, *prototypical* and *surrogate*.

Your teacher may wish to help you identify those words most likely to be unfamiliar to the largest number of you so that you may then check them out in a dictionary.

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